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ABSTRACT

In recognition of the need to increase academic standards in its freshman composition course and expand its remedial English offerings, Laredo Junior College (LJC) in Texas developed a three-level remedial English program, with the lowest level focusing on sentence writing, the middle level on paragraph writing, and the upper level on essay writing. After mandatory placement, students should progress from one course to another based on standardized departmental exams and satisfactory performance on writing assignments. Once the curricular decisions had been made and placement criteria determined, several severe potential problems emerged: (1) the staff was worried that the prospect of taking as many as three remedial English courses before being allowed to take the college-level English course would be so demoralizing that prospective students would be driven away; (2) since many other disciplines also planned to impose entry-level writing requirements, there was great concern that enrollments would drop in the other disciplines for at least a year while students worked their way to the college level; and (3) there was concern that students attending college under full-time Pell Grants would be unable to schedule of full load of 12 hours given their scheduling limitations. Some of these problems were ameliorated by offering students the chance to take 6-hour courses made up of the first and second levels or second and third levels of the remedial program. Under the new standards, 77% of LJC's freshmen are required to take remedial English (30% at the lowest level, 30% at the middle level, and 40% at the upper level), and every discipline developed minimum reading requirements for courses. With these changes, LJC is now ready to face the anticipated impact of a state-mandated basic skills test for college freshmen. (UCM)

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Tom Mitchell
Laredo Junior College
October 9, 1987

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Tom Mitchell

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Preparing the Unprepared: Revising LJC's Remedial Program

Like most of you, when I entered college, English departments did not offer remedial English classes, and they refused to spend time reviewing, much less teaching, fundamental writing skills. Those you had been taught in high school, they presumed, and now you were ready to develop college level composition skills -- niceties like logic, style, and tone. And if you were a student who still had problems making his verbs agree with his subjects, well, that was just too bad. With attrition rates frequently higher than 50%, passing freshman English became the real admissions requirement to a college education.

Laredo Junior College, like all junior colleges, is an open admissions institution, which, because of its large number of poorly prepared students, has always had at least one remedial English course. In the last decade, however, as students came to us with increasingly poor preparation to do college level work, it became obvious to us in the English Department that one remedial course was just not enough to get them ready for a college level composition course. Without one or two additional remedial courses to offer the weakest students, our dilemma was

this: If we didn't raise standards in the remedial course, either we would have to dramatically increase the already high attrition rate in the freshman composition course or we would have to lower our standards in the freshman composition course. Guess what we did? Right. Unconsciously, we lowered standards in the college level course. It wasn't long, however, before we realized what we had done. And then, of course, we didn't like ourselves very much. But no one believed us when we confessed that we had lowered standards, that students were passing freshman English who shouldn't be, that we wanted to raise standards but we felt that it would be a cruelty to do so when we knew that it would cause at least 70% of our students to fail. Our solution? We wanted at least two, possibly three, levels of remedial English so that we could prepare students for college level work without commiting the fraud of allowing students into classes which we knew they couldn't pass or continuing the fraud of leading them to believe that they had achieved college level writing skills when they had not. No one believed us. Educators, and certainly administrators, are not used to hearing other educators freely confess that they are doing a lousy job. What some really believed was that we wanted to build a empire in the English Department by increasing the number of required remedial courses. But we persisted in pointing out where the rock was, where the hard place was, and just who was between them.

We began to be believed only after the State of Texas began to test prospective education majors for reading, writing, and computational skills with the Pre-Professional Skills Test. Our students, like most minority students, performed abysmally, as we feared they would. Clearly we had to do a better job, as we had been saying.

And just as clearly that meant either raising standards at once and suffering a catastrophic and unconscionable failure rate or expanding the remedial English program to prepare future freshman composition students for our tougher requirements. The responsible choice, again as we had been saying, was to raise the entrance requirement for freshman composition and at the same time expand our remedial offerings so that we could place students at a level which we felt they could be successful. Raising entrance requirements alone and offering only one remedial class would not work. To do so would be to simply shift the burden of unacceptable attrition rates to the remedial level.

After a year of arguing our case before a campus-wide committee formed to address the need to reshape our remedial program, we received permission to develop a three level remedial English program, three levels rather than simply two because internal studies showed that three were needed.

Our internal studies consisted of pre-testing and post-testing all current remedial and freshman English students and then correlating their pre-test scores with grades in remedial and freshman English. After analyzing the results, we decided on cut-off scores for entrance into the college level course and for placement into one of the three levels of remedial English. Our decisions were based on certain presumptions.

First, if we intended to raise standards significantly in the college-level course, then students who were currently being allowed into the course but who were either withdrawing, failing, or doing D or C- work needed to take at least one remedial English course before entering freshman comp. Otherwise, we would be setting them up for failure.

Second, we knew we had to make the third level remedial course much more advanced than the one remedial course we had had for so long. If we didn't, of course, those students would not be prepared for our revised and tougher freshman comp. course. So, we set the cut-off score for the third level remedial course at the pre-test score average of those remedial students who made A's and B's. For the second or mid-level remedial course, we set the placement score range at the pre-test score average of remedial students who made C's. And for the first level or lowest remedial course, we placed the cut-off at the average of

those students who withdrew, failed, or made D's in the remedial course.

My purpose here is not to go into a detailed discussion of the composition objectives of each of the three levels, but, to simplify considerably, the lowest level focuses on sentence writing, the middle level on paragraph writing, and the upper level on essay writing. Placement is mandatory. To progress from one course to the other, students must pass standardized departmental exams and must have a passing average on their writing assignments.

Once curricular decisions had been made and placement criteria determined, we had to grapple with several rather severe problems.

First, everyone worried, ourselves perhaps most of all, that the prospect of having to take as many as 3 remedial English courses before being allowed to take the college level course would be so demoralizing that we would drive away prospective students, the very students a junior college like ours is supposed to salvage. A year and a half of remedial English! My God, we were told! Who's going to want to come to LJC when they can go somewhere else and not have to take remedial courses!

Second, since many of the other disciplines planned to impose entry level writing requirements because they too needed to raise standards (and specifically they planned to require that students complete the first two levels of remedial English before enrolling in their courses) there was great concern, even fear, that enrollments would drop in the other disciplines for at least a year while students worked their way to the third level. And if enrollments plummeted, would jobs then be secure?

Third, since many of our students receive full-time Pell Grants which require a 12 hour course load and since many of them would find themselves placed in the lowest level of remedial English and thereby excluded from many academic courses for a one or two semesters, there was very real concern that these students would be unable to schedule a full load of 12 hours. This again is an economic issue of very real importance, since junior colleges in Texas are funded according to the total number of contact hours students take. If students took fewer courses, we would get fewer dollars to pay our bills, and we all know what that leads to.

So there we were. We wanted to do the right thing, the responsible thing. We had to raise standards. But at almost every point it looked as though our educational integrity came into conflict with our personal, narrow, but very real

institutional self-interest, if you define that interest in such crass terms as jobs and cash to pay the bills.

Some of these problems were solved or at least made less severe by our decision to offer the students the chance to take 6 hour courses, in effect two courses during the same semester. We thus created three hour courses for each of the three remedial levels and then we combined the first and second level into a 6 hour course and the second and the third level into another 6 hour course. Students could then choose to take the 6 hour fast track or the 3 hour slow tract. With these combinations a student could, with hard work, complete a year and a half of remedial English in one year, or a year in one semester.

The 6 hour combinations solved some of the potential problems and alleviated many of the fears within the institution. Students could progress through the remedial sequence faster and thereby be eligible to take other courses sooner, thus making the program less intimidating to students and less threatening to instructors in other disciplines who worried about their enrollments and their jobs. Students who enrolled in 6 hours of remedial English would also have no problem finding two 3 hour courses for which they were eligible so that they could enroll as full-time students and receive full financial aid assistance.

Currently about 60% of the students are choosing the 6 hour combination courses and 40% the 3 hour courses.. Instructors, I believe, generally prefer the 6 hour courses because they allow them to have twice the contact with the same students during the semester and thus can learn each individual student's writing problems more thoroughly and can establish a closer and usually more effective relationship with the student.

Another solution to the problems mentioned earlier, particularly the fear that expanding the remedial program would cause a drop in enrollment and thereby threaten jobs, was the unequivocal commitment made by our administration and Board of Trustees to improving the quality of instruction throughout the college, not just in the writing program, and to stand by that commitment by insuring that no one would be endanger of losing his job because of a drop in enrollment during the transitional period between implementation of the new remedial program and the time when previously excluded students would be ready and eligible to take academic courses with writing prerequisites.

I am happy to report that we suffered no loss in enrollment, either in the college as a whole, nor in most individual disciplines with increased writing requirements. This is in spite of the fact that 77% of our freshmen are required to take remedial English. That means that this fall 840 students are taking remedial English -- approximately 30% of them at the

lowest level, 30% at the middle level, and 40% at the upper level.

You might also be interested in knowing that 54% are required to take a remedial reading class, and 85% are required to take one or more remedial math courses.

I have not had time to tell you of other significant changes that we made at LJC during this same period, but I should mention that every discipline developed minimum reading and, where appropriate, math requirements for courses. Thus, students who do not have the minimum writing, reading, and computational skills to succeed in a course must develop those skills before being allowed to enroll in the course. Traditional academic courses, for instance, now require at least a 9th grade reading level. Next year, that will be increased to a 10.5. And in the following year to a 12.0

I wish that I could state unequivocally that we are perfectly pleased with the new program. We are certainly convinced that it is far superior to the one semester program we had before, far superior. But like good English teachers, we are always looking for something to correct, something that can be improved. One improvement that we have made since beginning the new program 2 years ago is to eliminate the grades of D and F. We now give a grade of "No Credit," NC, to those students who are not

ready to progress to the next level. Students who pass are given an A, B, or C, depending on the quality of their work. Since the "No Credit" grade is counted the same as withdrawing from the course, we have thus eliminated punitive grades without sacrificing our standards.

Looking back over the two year period of endless meetings and nasty institutional battles which led eventually to the creation of our new, expanded remedial program, I think it is almost a miracle that it exists at all. Those who were concerned about quantity (numbers and cash) fought with those who were insistent on quality. Those who believed that mandatory remedial programs violated a "Student's right to fail" argued with those who believed instead that "Students have a right to succeed." The soul of our institution was at stake then. The divisiveness of those days, I am glad to report, is over. And now that the State of Texas is planned to require a basic skills test of all college freshmen beginning in the fall of 1989 and is mandating remedial work for those who fail, we feel that Laredo Junior College is now ready to cope with what promises to be the enormous impact of that test.

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